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Stygiophobia and Other Fears of Death and Loneliness: Collected Fiction

by

Jennifer E. Meli

A thesis submitted to the Department of English of the State University of New York

College at Brockport, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

May 5, 2010

Stygiophobia and Other Fears of Death and Loneliness: Collected Fiction

by

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To my Joe

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Abstract

This creative thesis is comprised of five short stories and an introduction, which details artistic influences and other factors related to writing. The first story, “Through the Electronic Looking Glass,” is a story simultaneously about a dissolving relationship and the intersection between art and commerce. “Stygiophobia,” the title work of the collection meaning “fear of hell,” deals with a Christian protestor’s experience at a gay pride parade. “So Damned Civilized” tells the story of an office dinner party gone horribly wrong and gives a glimpse into the evils of human nature. “Affliction,” at its core, is about a zombie apocalypse and its effects on a suburban strip mall, but it also explores whether people can put aside their differences for the common good... during an election season. Finally, “Love, Backwards” centers around a teenage girl and her deceased sister’s boyfriend and the ways in which the two of them cope with loss. All of the stories are tied together by either the threat of death (from zombies, the afterlife, and car accidents) or loneliness (from infidelity, rejection, and moving away), and that both of these concepts embody a sort of “hell” for the stories’ characters. I feel that each story highlights my achievements in Brockport’s Creative Writing M.A. program.

An Introduction

One of the events in my life that shaped the way I look at both life and death was the terminal illness of my grandfather when I was 21. He was diagnosed with a brain tumor, and all the doctors could really let him do was go peacefully. He lived out the last of his days barely able to talk and completely unable to walk. He was known for his corny jokes and sense of humor. He may have told the same jokes and stories repeatedly, but he somehow made them *his* jokes and stories, and I always enjoyed listening to him. It had occurred to me at a younger age that there would come a time when I would no longer hear his jokes. I just never realized that it would be while he was still alive.

For me, writing gives the chance to talk about things I may never get the chance to say aloud. My writing is my way of working out some kind of issue, whether small or large, by using a character or characters to explore another point of view. Real life events inspired most of my stories, and for those that seem too extreme to be true, there is at least some bit of realism contained within. I want to preserve these fragments of inspiration in a lasting form. After all, who knows what will happen tomorrow?

Two stories that I wrote prior to attending Brockport emphasize this aspect of my writing. While I would love to include them in my thesis, they do not reflect the work I've done since I began the program here. However, they were the ones that got me into Brockport with my application, and I feel that they deserve some discussion

in terms of my development. “Don’t Go” was something I wrote back when my grandfather was ill as a way to cope with being away at school and unable to see him. During a short break that semester, I heard my grandmother talk about the daily trials of caring for my grandfather. I put myself in her place the best way I knew how—through writing—and I think this is probably the truest piece I’ve ever written. Although heavily based on my grandparents’ experiences, the story does contain some fictional elements, and for that, it won the Mary Louise White Fiction Award during my senior year at SUNY Fredonia.

“Viral,” the other story I had included, counters the realism of “Don’t Go.” It’s a story about the cult of celebrity and the glorification of death in the media. In it, people commit suicide, and, through their dying wishes, their deaths wind up on the internet for all to see (imagine *Faces of Death* meets YouTube). Think of how long we have to endure tributes to the life of a famous person after they’ve passed, whether a prolific musician, like Michael Jackson, or a reality show train wreck, such as Anna Nicole. The death of a public figure is almost like a mockery of grief, since the dead never stay dead through the flood of mass media. This story represents the extreme towards which we are headed should our obsession with death and entitlement to “fifteen minutes of fame” ever collide. Certainly, death fascinates us all, especially when concerning the question of an afterlife and our hopes of “a better place” for our loved ones. Yet when a celebrity dies, instead of grief, we have excitement—we can dissect the deceased’s life because we feel their passing grants us permission.

Some of the stories I've written since starting my Master's at SUNY Brockport continue in this vein of using real life experience as an exploration of a new idea. "Stygiophobia," formerly "Rain on the Parade," was inspired by a gay pride parade in Rochester. The title comes from a word I'd discovered more recently meaning "the fear of hell." My boyfriend and I ended up on the corner across from the religious protestors, and I had to wonder what some of their motivations were for being there. After all, it was a muggy, midsummer Saturday afternoon—certainly, there are better things to do on such a day than yell at people enjoying a parade. There was also some fascination, on my part, with evangelical Christianity's obsession with where we go when we die—almost like living for death. The protestors weren't there for fun, naturally, but because of a strong belief in the afterlife and what one must do in order to avoid hell. Maybe they even believe that they are doing the right thing by spreading this message, and being there to condemn the event makes them feel better about their own salvation. Simultaneously, they use what seems to outsiders like hatred or hate speech in order to protest the love that others have for one another. The phobia in the title seems like something one of these protestors would suffer from that might motivate him to do this kind of work—not just fearing the concept of hell, though, but of actually going there. For me, the idea of hell, or any afterlife, is a foreign concept. I wanted to get into a protestor's head for this one because it is a position with which I strongly disagree, but I had a strange desire at the time to feel sympathy for these men. I liked the idea of having one of them unsure of whether he really wants to be there, like he's just following the pack. I also liked an idea I

received during workshop, which was to have a “turf war” between churches, as if salvation is a contest.

“Through the Electronic Looking Glass” deals with the figurative death of a relationship, the destruction of one’s creation, and the dichotomy between art as commerce and art as creativity. While on the surface it deals mainly with betrayal and a nasty breakup, in some ways, for me, it also represents the ways in which words, images, and even music hold power over us. Relationships have that same power, even in a benevolent manner, and when that dissolves, just as when someone dies, it gives one the feeling of utter panic—what could possibly come next? For the protagonist, Anastasia, this rejection gives way to the fear of loneliness and causes her to contemplate her feelings on other aspects of her life, like her photography. Fortunately, she realizes that although people may come and go from her life, she can rely on both herself and her artistic abilities. The story began, I suppose, as the result of an “ear worm” (one of those songs that just will not get out of your head), and further developed through workshopping at Brockport. I chose the setting of an English city just because of the origins of the band who inspired the story, and although it’s a place to which I’ve never been, I feel that Anastasia doesn’t belong anywhere but there. Not to mention, it’s the birthplace of punk and other influential music forms that break the barriers between music for commercial use and music for the sake of making art or a political statement.

“Affliction” is about a zombie apocalypse and one retail outlet’s reaction to the crisis. The background to it is that throughout graduate school, I have worked at a

similar store and couldn't help but notice that we had a good amount of materials useful for fighting off the walking dead. (Yes, this was where my mind went when things were slow, retail-wise.) In addition to that, the 2008 Presidential election saturated the media with near-constant coverage of all matter of debates, scandals, and other political ads masquerading as news. All I could think while writing "Affliction" was that if zombies *did* exist, most people would still be finger pointing and arguing partisan politics rather than working together to, you know, kill the zombies.

"So Damned Civilized" came about shortly after a dinner with my boyfriend in an upscale restaurant on the east side of Rochester. During dinner, we decided it would be amusing to cast a nearby boisterous table into some type of corporate melodrama, and thus the story was born. The company where the characters worked, Human Resources International, is a thinly veiled depiction of a local company where I temped (though, to my knowledge, no such event ever occurred). While it was a "valuable work experience," as they say in job interviews, the environment there teemed with materialism and adults stuck in a high school mentality, and an extended stint there gave me the motivation to go to graduate school finally. It also provided excellent fodder for my fiction. I like the protagonist, Nick, and his wife, Mary, because they want nothing to do with the drama that unfolds around them, much as I felt temping in places where one group huddled in a cubicle to gossip about others further down the row. Meanwhile, the other characters in the story are guilty of

unfaithfulness, and the anger and sadness that their jilted significant others experience reinforces the theme in my thesis concerning the fear of loneliness.

The last story in the collection, “Love, Backwards” (formerly “Luck”), is a story that feels very personal to me, as well as being a bit of a foray into young adult literature. I liked the idea of the younger sister in love with the older sister’s boyfriend, and the characters had appeared in a dream once and hadn’t ever let go. I moved the ages up a bit and put a life-changing circumstance into the mix to explore exactly how the younger sibling could get what she wanted without hurting her sister. The backdrop of the mid-90s is important to this story as well. This was a time where, if you missed someone and wanted to communicate with him or her, you had to call on a phone (and hope someone would be around to pick up at the other end) or you actually had to visit this person. It doesn’t sound like much, but considering how addicted to technology most people are these days, it would probably feel like the Stone Age if we had to revert to this period. (Does your phone do too much? There’s an app for that!) I also felt particularly nostalgic while writing this story, so much of the story is inspired, again, by the music of or near that time.

My creative inspirations are mostly contemporary and Western (i.e. American or European), but I would say that these authors have all crafted some of the best short stories ever written. When I think of the perfect short story collection, three different works come to mind: *East, West* by Salman Rushdie (1994), *The Bloody Chamber* by Angela Carter (1979), and Wang Ping’s *The Last Communist Virgin* (2007).

East, West bridges old world and new, and “At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers” remains one of my favorites for its blend of politics and consumerism. There is also another layer to the story of lost love and references to popular culture (in this case *The Wizard of Oz*). I enjoy threading pop culture in with my own work, such as with the Sonic Youth references in “Love, Backwards,” or “Affliction” paying homage to George Romero’s *Dawn of the Dead*, with soulless zombies standing in for mindless consumers. In “Auction,” the narrator witnesses the sale of virtually anything: not just the ruby slippers of *Oz* fame but later “[family] trees, coats of arms, [and] royal lineages” (Rushdie 102). Rich women wear Picasso’s *Guernica* and Goya’s *Disasters of War* in sequins on their jackets (Rushdie 91), reinforcing the current (mis)perception of art as commerce. In my own work, I tried to portray Anastasia’s struggle as a photographer in “Through the Electronic Looking Glass” as a similar battle between paycheck and passion: in the end, she ultimately destroys what she lives for.

The Bloody Chamber re-imagines fairy tales and folklore from a feminist perspective, and Carter’s retellings have wielded a certain amount of influence over my own desire to explore alternate viewpoints in my writing. Carter, for example, uses three different stories to explore the “Beauty and the Beast” fable, with the collection’s namesake as an exploration not of the “Beast’s” physical features but instead of his inner evil. (This story is also based on “Bluebeard,” but I read it as a third “Beauty and the Beast” as well for its depiction of a metaphorical beastliness/savagery instead of a primarily physical one.) Carter also challenges the

Beauty/Beast juxtaposition in “The Tiger’s Bride,” where Beauty becomes a Beast at the end, interestingly with “beautiful fur” (Carter 169). This calls the concepts of beauty and beastliness into question, especially if the “Beauty’s” transformation at the end doesn’t make her ugly. In my story “Stygiophobia,” I wanted to examine the thoughts and motivations of a protestor at a gay pride event. Where Jared may seem an antagonist considering my own political beliefs (and see if you can find my cameo in the story), I wanted to show that he’s just a person, not a villain, despite political or moral differences. He feels he and his church are doing good works by pleasing God and living by the Bible just as the members of the gay and lesbian community in the story feel they are overcoming adversity and promoting equality for the good of society. The lines between hero/villain blur there just as Beauty and Beast are not mutually exclusive in Carter’s work.

The Last Communist Virgin features stories that don’t seem linked together intentionally, but they interlace as if fate placed them that way. Wan Li and Jeanne Shin appear in multiple narratives, and whether the characters live in rural China or an American metropolis, the narrative makes even the most mundane location something out of an enchanted fable. I was hooked to her collection just mere pages in by the setting of “Where the Poppies Blow,” as Ping’s narrator describes the flowers of New Paradise in all their Technicolor detail. Setting is important in my own work. From the shop-saturated streets and dim nightclubs in Anastasia’s city to the dusty roads and eclectic record shops of the small town that Olivia and Max

inhabit, and whether in an upscale restaurant or a gritty home improvement store, I want to continue to expand my use of setting into more diverse locales.

The *Best American Short Stories* collections from the past couple of years have provided me with a fantastic look at the state of contemporary short fiction, which I would say is currently alive and well. Karen Russell's stories, "St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves" and "Vampires in the Lemon Grove" are reminiscent of Angela Carter. Russell and Carter both blend reality with the supernatural in a way that I tried to emulate in "Affliction." John Barth's "Toga Party" from the 2007 collection definitely inspired bits of "So Damned Civilized" for its references to Bacchanal hedonism. The Greek and Roman-influenced setting of the restaurant is partially attributed to the toga party of this setting, and the absurd behavior of the so-called civilized adults of Barth's story are reflected in the parking lot catfight at the end of my story. T.C. Boyle's "Admiral" in the 2008 collection further reflects the absurdity of wealthy and supposedly mature adults by portraying a couple who clone their dead dog and demand his replacement is raised in the same way as the original. Alex's line about the dog at the beginning of "So Damned Civilized" is a reference to this story (although there are no actual cloned dogs in mine).

Longer works have also been influential in the way that I write. Lost Generation writers F. Scott Fitzgerald and John Dos Passos have long held spots in my personal list of great authors. Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* also influenced "So Damned Civilized" (I named the narrator after Nick Carraway, and the green lights

make an appearance). Dos Passos' *USA* trilogy, especially *The Big Money*, about the 1920s, is influential in its experimental style (such as in the Camera's Eye and News Reel sections), and although it may not come through in this thesis, I like the idea of using representations of media within my fiction. The descriptions of videos in "Viral" came from a desire to use this strategy. I'm not entirely sure why I'm so drawn to the 1920s, but I like that, like our time, it is portrayed in fiction as influenced by the commercial, and people spend with seemingly reckless abandon.

One of my favorite authors, Don DeLillo, always manages to intersect the real with the hyper-real (like *White Noise*'s Airborne Toxic Event—a practice drill involving children preparing for a real event) or art with commerce (*Great Jones Street*, *Mao II*). For Anastasia in "Through the Electronic Looking Glass" all of these concepts intersect. The images of her ex, Christian, on the televisions are either real or the hallucinations of her psyche, depending how one interprets it (I left it deliberately vague). Cynthia Ozick's short story "The Shawl" and novella *Rosa* receive my honorable mention for complementing each other perfectly; it's almost as if one work cannot exist without the other. For my final project for Grammar class, back in fall 2008, I dissected Ozick's use of grammar in "The Shawl," and I like how something simple like a fragment or a dash can convey a certain mood for a narrator. Although being a self-described grammarian, I like that fiction writing allows me to break rules and play with language to get an idea across, whereas academic writing does not always allow for this kind of flexibility.

I don't know if there is one specific literary tradition where I fit in, and I don't think I could even come close to directly imitating any one individual author. However, these works and authors have all had a tremendous impact on how I develop an abstract idea, an event, or a feeling into something three-dimensional and tangible. These inspirations, along with my personal experiences, inform my ideas and their translation into written words on the page.

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Through the Electronic Looking Glass

Bastard!

Anastasia kicked the edge of her coffee table with one pointy-toed boot, knocking a near-full ceramic ashtray to the floor. *Son of a bitch!* The torch lamp in the corner, turned to its bulb's lowest setting, cast an orange-red edge around everything in the flat's living area. A light that felt more like darkness. Anastasia carefully avoided the smashed shards from the picture frame's glass as she picked up her ashtray. The splintered web over the photograph (of *them*, appropriately) and the pieces of glass that trailed along the carpet beside it were tears that mixed among the spilled remnants of cigarettes long gone.

Some public access program flickered on the television, and a bespectacled expert with dubious credentials explained the vague status of coma patients. "Is he alive? Is he well?" Dr. So-and-so's green alien face and purple comb over suddenly turned several varying shades of blue, as though his features were at the whim of a melancholy painter. Somehow, Anastasia possessed the only television on the whole bloody island that decided to choose its own colors at random rather than display them perfectly like everyone else's. Instead of banging her fist on top of the TV like normal, she shut it off with a violent pop of her wrist.

The fight had only occurred three hours ago (or was it four?) but it seemed simultaneously far in the past and as fresh as if Christian had just slammed the front

door and vowed never to return. Here she had sat all that time without feeling it, in her own coma, her life-preserving/life-prolonging IV drip in a bottle instead of a tube.

She teetered on the heels of her black vinyl “fuck-me” boots (that’s what *he* called them) and sank back onto her sagging couch. Lighter in hand, she ripped the cigarette pack from the cluttered table only to find it empty. Bloody hell. She just picked them up yesterday! It’s his fault that my lungs will fester and rot, she thought.

And it was her fault that sometimes he drank too much. Her fault that he sometimes couldn’t get up on stage and sing or strum a few chords on his battered Les Paul. Her fault that they weren’t as successful as they could be. She held them back, sure; it had nothing to do with any of his proclivities for drink. Her fault that the band had given him an “ultimatum” and that he chose them over her. *Pretentious wankers...* I’m in control of my habits, she thought, taking another swig of her liquid courage straight from the vodka bottle.

And who, she wondered as a bitter afterthought, would direct their promo videos? Who was it that had slaved over their press kit, offered to begin their tour documentary and web site? Who would feed their images to the entertainment-starved masses now? She had been the kick in the ass they needed to make it that far, but they no longer needed her once the labels took notice. They had the *real* press paying attention, all poised to click and shoot once they embarked on their first world tour (God knew Europe had seen enough of them already). On to greener pastures, then.

Anastasia eyed the packet on the coffee table—proofs for the band’s album artwork. Christian had picked the wrong time to tell her that he “couldn’t be around a

codependent bitch anymore” now that he was “going places” (maybe his words, maybe hers; she couldn’t keep track). Did that mean her work had all been for naught? Maybe she could hunt him down tonight, make him pay her for all the work she’d done, like a whore seeking payment from her john.

She threw on her black leather jacket and brushed her long, dark brown hair from her eyes to head down to the corner shop. Out of cigs and the night was young. Maybe she could stop by the Chaos Factory, where their gig was tonight, a little hole in the wall nice enough to host a farewell show before the big tour. Nice enough *to* the band, but probably no longer good enough *for* them. The costs of developing and printing those photos were reason alone to track Christian down.

As she was leaving, she thought she saw his face on the TV screen, nodding slowly to the rhythm of a gentle lullaby. She thought she’d turned it off. She couldn’t see his eyes, but he seemed to plead with her to come to him, to find him, and for a second, with her hand on the doorknob, she thought maybe they could work things out. She grabbed the packet and stuffed it carefully between her jacket and her shirt, careful not to bend the envelope’s contents. Maybe she wasn’t his whore. Right before she turned to open the door and step out, though, his jumpy black and white image—what she perceived as his image—had vanished.

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The massive black iron door of the apartment building creaked open and slapped back against the jamb on its rusted hinges. Anastasia groaned. The sound wouldn't have bothered her so much if she hadn't been in desperate need of a cigarette. Only a block away, she reminded herself, her lighter stuffed into one pocket of her slim, dark jeans, a ten pound note folded crisp and neat into the other.

The full moon mingled with the neon opulence of the shop signs and billboards, and the resulting prism of light splashed over the sidewalk before Anastasia's feet. She caught sight of her reflection in a clothing boutique's storefront window. It was too bad, she thought, that Christian just broke up with her. She looked better than the slender, glassy-eyed mannequins in the display did. (They were the perfect women, after all—they couldn't complain!) What great arm candy Anastasia would have made for him...

The electronic sensor in the corner store's entrance chimed as Anastasia walked through the doorway. The bubblegum-snapping clerk didn't even look up from whatever tabloid drivel she buried her nose in to keep from working. Behind her, the TV flashed scenes from an episode of a popular reality program. Anastasia didn't watch the show but knew what it was, from commercials. It involved a bunch of morons living in a mansion, scripted to argue and probably paid to have sex with one another. Entertainment at its finest.

"Pack of fags," Anastasia said, pointing to the display in the white plastic shelf above the register. The cashier tossed the magazine onto the counter. It crumpled over some Hollywood actor's airbrushed, porcelain-veneer face. The

cashier popped a big pink bubble over her lips and sucked the gum back into her mouth. It seemed the oral equivalent of an eye roll. Sorry to interrupt you on such a busy Saturday night, Anastasia thought as she produced the money from her pocket and looked at the otherwise empty shop.

On the television, some tracksuit-wearing loser was yelling at a chubby, frumpy girl with gold earrings that looked heavier than her entire head. From what Anastasia gleaned, it had something to do with her sleeping with other members of the house. They'd probably make amends by the end of the episode over a dimebag or a positive pregnancy test. Maybe even both. If Anastasia and Christian broke up in such a public forum, they'd probably get much higher ratings than this bollocks. What with him getting too famous for her now, she could certainly come up with something to insult his ego. They wouldn't just stand there and moan about commitment. Christian didn't even bother staying with her to *wait* for the tell-all exposé she could have penned about him. Which was a shame, Anastasia mused, since she heard publishing companies compensated nicely these days.

Anastasia mentally listed the photographs and items around her apartment she might sell for blackmail as she waited patiently for her smokes. (Patiently on the outside, at least; her nicotine cravings sometimes made her feel like a rabid dog locked in the boot of a Volkswagen Beetle.) Christian's face adorned almost every wall, if she counted the flyers and posters she had so generously constructed for his band. Their photos from abroad, however, remained scattered at random, day trips between gigs on the early low-budget tours. That could earn some quick cash if things

really took off for the band. Not that he deserved it now... A younger, happier Anastasia and Christian smiled from in front of the Coliseum in Rome and stood on the edge of cliffs in the Alps, arms spread out and mock-terror splayed across their faces like they were about to fall. He never did like those pictures—never thought he looked as good on her candid camera. They were, she noted bitterly, also the select few photos of the two of them together, taken from a tripod with a timer. (They were also taken, she noted, on holidays paid for with mostly her money, back when the band was struggling. *Thank you, freelancing!*) She wondered if what he really meant to say was that he couldn't look as good with her around.

The camera never considered the size of his ego and the arguments they had after things became more about *his* band than *their* relationship. Who thinks to stop and take a picture of someone while throwing a drink in his face, or while he is calling her a succubus? That was going too far even for Anastasia—she would do a lot for her art, but risking damage to her camera (by vodka, fist, or otherwise) was far too stressful to add into the mix. Anastasia's art photography, of other, thankfully non-cataclysmic events, hung all over the apartment, reminding her of all the gallery openings she attended with *him*. But since the band had started expanding their fan base—since she'd offered her services—that had become her life. Other than what the band paid her to do, she felt that she hadn't taken a decent picture in months.

If there were no pictures of their arguments, did they really occur? Could they instead characterize their entire relationship by saving one another on mountaintops, never in any real danger in the first place? That argument could work against him.

What other girl could he meet (in Europe or in the States) who would tolerate his love affair with himself?

The cashier must have finally figured out how to make change for a ten because a messy tower of wrinkled bills sat on the counter. As Anastasia was about to leave, she thought she saw Christian's face again on the television. His gray-blue face looked away from the imaginary camera shyly and his bleached hair hung in silvery celluloid strands obscuring his eyes. His lips curled coyly into a smirk as he sang. Anastasia got the urge to sing along with him but she didn't know the words. She snatched her cigarettes off the counter and turned away from the television, ashamed and mad at herself for not understanding quite why. She headed to the door, and as she went to take one final glance at his image, she only saw a quarreling couple.

The gig Christian's band had that night at The Chaos Factory must have been about to start when Anastasia left the shop. That, she suddenly remembered, was the reason she had put on *those* boots (they were effective not only for collecting looks but for gazing above the heads of the crowd as well). The memories of her evening plans came back to her as if they had been found in boxes in the dusty corners of her mind.

In retrospect, Anastasia wished she had snapped a photo of his face when he told her she wasn't what he wanted...or what he needed. She couldn't remember. His

eyes, a pale grayish blue on any other day, had reflected only the dim orange light coming from the lamp in the corner of the room. To say they glowed like *just* fire sounded like an understatement. An inferno seemed more accurate. Perhaps she'd only seen him through her own reddened vision. "I've moved on from all this!" he shouted. "It's time for me to regain control of my life rather than placating your desire to play the Nancy to my Sid!"

"Who says I do that?" she countered. "Your band telling you that or did you come up with it all by yourself?"

He turned away from her. The fire in his eyes flickered and then went out, leaving nothing but the charred remains of a passion long gone. The irises were just a bit grayer than before. "Face it, we've been nothing more than a business relationship for the past few months, anyway," he said. "The band and I appreciate your efforts. Goodbye, Anastasia."

After he slammed the door behind him, Anastasia stood in her whiskey-haze and pondered what that meant. *Efforts*? Not contributions, not accomplishments, but *efforts*? She sneered at the spot on the rug he'd vacated moments before, and then decided to contribute further to emptying the liquor bottle on the coffee table.

I put in a hell of a lot more than just "effort," Anastasia asserted once more as she lit her cigarette outside the shop. She inhaled the thick, earthy scent of the tobacco. Sweet relief. The autumn breeze ran its cool fingers along the base of her neck in a lover's caress. For a moment, the sharp pangs of loneliness swept over her.

Rather than head back to her apartment, she opted to walk down the block. Fresh air would do her wonders.

She passed a small green and gold-painted pub where the off-key melodies of merry inebriation floated into the street. She glanced into the mirror-like windows of the dance club next door, fluffing her shaggy hair as she walked by. A sudden hollow, ghostly breeze knocked the cherry of her cigarette to the ground. She stopped to relight it outside a porn shop with blacked out windows. When she looked up, something at the end of the block caught her eye.

Like a moth, she slowly gravitated to the light of the electronics store down the street. Its shop front displayed all the gadgets for which she never had the money, but which made her consider destroying her meager savings account anyway. The store's window promised more megapixels, higher definition, wider views, and a better, more colorful reality, all paid for on installment. Usually, the televisions, laptops, and computer monitors remained blank after the store closed for the night. But Anastasia could see their liquid crystal displays spilling through the glass and out onto the pavement like moonlight floating atop ocean waves. She moved closer. Her legs were treacherous; her heels were cement blocks tied to her feet. She wanted to sink beneath that sea of light and bathe in its tide.

She jogged the rest of the way down the block. Christian's face stared out from every screen in the window, each one looping simultaneously to the same song she couldn't hear. Her first reaction, when she got close enough, was to put her hand against the glass and reach through to pull Christian toward her. He still appeared in

the eerie blue aura of the TV-Christian from the apartment, as if each video image took on the kaleidoscopic Technicolor of her television. She tried to tell herself this time that it wasn't really him. Her mind argued, *well then who is it?* Again, she fought the urge to sing words she couldn't hear.

She couldn't go through her days watching him through glass, knowing that he was so far away. Knowing that she couldn't reach through the impenetrable barrier of cables and wires.

Later that night, she would think back and perhaps remember saying something to the driver in the taxicab she hailed. Her mind decided to fill in the missing scene only with the word "Chaos."

Through the cab's window, the city screamed at her in his voice. Every sign and billboard showed him. Each passerby on the sidewalk wore his face like a mask. Even when she closed her eyes, his face still haunted her in shutter clicks and strobe light flashes.

Anastasia used most of her change to pay the cab fare, and when she arrived at the club's door she did all she could to keep from running inside. Flyers for Christian's band lined the club's dark foyer; his many sets of photocopied eyes surrounded her. What gall for him to keep the pictures *she* recalled taking hanging there.

Christian's voice was the first thing she heard, magnified great and powerful through the club's P.A. system. Pay no attention, she thought, but she inched her way past the winding half-circle of the dull silver bar and floated, not willingly, on autopilot, toward the stage.

"We're really looking forward to this tour," Christian declared beneath the rotating red stage lights. The band was apparently between songs. The crowd cheered, and everyone but Anastasia seemed to smile at his words. Like *they* could really know what he meant. But she knew—what he meant was that *he* was looking forward to it, that he couldn't wait to leave everyone behind, and that it wouldn't have been possible without "the little people." And worse yet, the crowd ate it up! If only they knew, Anastasia thought with a scowl, that he'd grown sick of their affections and deemed it time to move on to some other ready-and-willing admirer.

Christian suddenly turned and, like he had some sort of radar that could pick her out in a crowd, he looked directly into her eyes. *Maybe he can't see me. Maybe the lights are blinding him.* She dreaded that this would be the last time they would see one another, and knew deep down, without the use of talismans or tarot cards, that she was probably right.

"So it's thanks to you," Christian said again. He finally looked away from her, back up at the rest of the crowd. "It's thanks to all of you that we're going places." Without another word, the drums started up like machine gun fire, the bass rumbled, and Christian struck a power chord on his guitar that swam in a steady swell over the

audience's heads. The spectators in front of her threw their arms above their heads in the ecstasy of the sound. She could no longer see his face.

Christian began to howl into the microphone, and the tops of the band's heads and amplifiers, barely visible above the sea of hands, changed from red to green to blue and back to red again. She saw, through the dozens of outstretched arms in front of her, large film crew cameras perched on broad shoulders. She could barely make out the letters of a regional TV station across the equipment's plastic expanse. So, she hadn't been crazy after all. He never told her they were filming this without her.

"Fuck you," Anastasia said. She felt a twinge of shock move through her core, bothered by this sudden outburst. Against her will (or giving into some primal urge, she reasoned), she said it again and louder. "Fuck you!" she shouted. She clenched her fists and leaned forward, bent at the waist. She sucked the club's thick air into her lungs in one gulp and kept on screaming. Trying to make her voice heard over the music felt like clawing her way through the crumbling dirt of a six-foot deep hole. "You owe everything to me, you bastard! *Look at me!*"

A couple of people around her glanced her way, then rolled their eyes and pushed idly past her to make their way closer to the stage. Closer to their false idol. Christian continued singing, head bouncing steadily to the rhythm of the song. The same move she could see everywhere she went, taunting her, refuting her involvement in everything. Like she had never even existed.

Anastasia finally let herself walk away. She sulked back into the club's front corridor, shoulders slumped; the growing darkness of the black spray-painted walls

closed around her in more of a choke than an embrace. She looked up at the fluorescent band flyers stapled to the plywood. With one quick motion of her hand, she ripped a row of them off the wall. Not yet satisfied, she grabbed the rest on the opposite side of the hallway, crumpling them tightly in her fist and tossing them to the floor. Her nails were claws. Her teeth felt like fangs and her jaw snapped and reset itself so that the hardest of punches couldn't shatter her bones.

A couple of kids with neon mohawks stood in the corner and stared at her. They had confusion written into their eyes and laughter hanging merrily on their lips. She lunged at them with an animalistic growl, but she held herself back, as if trapped by an invisible glass wall. She flung the palms of her hands at the door of the club, escaping the heat of the crowd and her own disappointment, back into the cool darkness of the night air.

She lit another cigarette as soon as her feet hit the concrete. Crap pub smoking ban. She decided to walk home, as she didn't have enough for cab fare and didn't care how long it took her to get there anyway. In her high-heeled boots, each step she took stabbed a new part of her feet.

When she neared an intersection, she felt something sharp stab up near her collarbone, and she remembered the band photos she'd tucked away in her jacket. She removed them from beneath the garment and opened the envelope. Each glossy print shone below the streetlamps, as if her hands were full of diamonds. She flipped through the stack. More like fool's gold, she thought. All their faces, especially

Christian's face, glowered at her; they dared her to do what she never would do to her art before.

She looked left, then right, and then moved a little further from the edge of the sidewalk. Her cigarette lighter came out of her pocket in an almost automatic motion. Her nostrils detected the shiny paper's pungent odor as soon as the flame hit the edge. A drop of the hot melting ink dripped onto the back of her hand, but she let it sit there. The flames licked the photographs from end to end, slowly—agonizingly—cremating the images.

Anastasia resisted the desire to gather the effigy in her hands and place it into a neat pile; she left it on the sidewalk for someone else to mourn.

Stygiophobia

Jesus Died for Your Sin!

That's what Jared's sign said, and he turned it in his hands a couple of times after his pastor gave it to him. Two skinny, shorthaired women holding hands passed him on the sidewalk. They scowled at him or perhaps at the group of men amongst which he stood. Jared's group all carried similar poster boards covered in messages tagged with Biblical verses.

Pastor David, a short man in his sixties wearing a faded red baseball cap, handed the last of the signs to the other men in the group. "Expect to be yelled at," he said above the din of the throngs lining the street. "Expect to be harassed for doing the Lord's work. No one said it would be easy."

Men and women, wearing rainbow shirts, rainbow pins, and rainbow hats had swarmed the whole city block. They chanted, smiled, and laughed as they hugged one another in recognition or greeting. Some sat on the edge of the sidewalk, their feet dangling into the closed-off road while others leaned against glass and brick storefronts. Jared's fellow parishioners did not smile or hug anyone. They held their signs high, a reminder that such arrogance was a crime in the eyes of their omniscient God. Surely, as the gray clouds converged above this repugnant block party of sin (Pastor David's words), Jared knew the Good Lord was just as displeased.

As the police escorts turned the corner, the horde around them let out a cheer. The first float came down the street, a visual cacophony of white lace and pastel

archways, atop which stood a woman dressed in a tuxedo and tails and a man wearing a bridal gown. How absurd. Jared held his sign over his head and another couple-- male, this time--just walked past the group and shook their heads.

"Too bad," said one of the men, making an obvious attempt to be audible above the crowd. "They could have such a great time if they put down the Bible and went out to the clubs with us!"

"Who said they haven't?" said the other man, walking away arm in arm with his partner. He cast a glance at one of the other men in the group, reading loudly from Leviticus. "Someone doth protest too much."

Jared's wife, Alice, had already told him the whole affair was a waste of time, and as he saw political activists and marching bands (rainbow-clad, also) passing down the lane, he wondered if she was right. That morning, they had stood in the sunny kitchen of their small, one-story home, she washing dishes, he leaning against the cool countertop by an open window.

Over the sink's rushing tap, Alice sighed and shook her head. "It seems like an awful lot of effort," she had said.

"What does?"

Alice put a freshly scrubbed pan onto the drying rack and, not looking up, said, "You know, driving forty-five minutes to go bother people at a parade."

Jared had stopped leaning against the counter and stood up tall. "It's God's work," he'd said. He wasn't sure at the time if it was a conscious move or not, but he tried to puff out his chest and shoulders, as if this would aid his argument. Yet having

always been a skinny guy, he knew this act was unsuccessful. "Pastor David says we're responsible for saving their souls--even if we just save one today!"

"Pastor David says a lot of things," Alice replied, still not facing him. She appeared mesmerized by a smudge on a drinking glass.

"What does that mean?" Jared said. He tried looking at her but she wasn't budging. "Don't you like the new church?" He and Alice, along with their soon-to-be five-year-old daughter, Madison, had only moved a few months before, when Jared's finance company promoted and transferred him from central New York to upstate. They tried a couple of other churches at first, but this one just felt *right* for him.

"I like them, sure," Alice said. She brushed a strand of her long, light brown hair out of her face. She always referred to it as "mousy," but Jared thought it looked perfectly soft and beautiful. "*But*," she continued, "I was raised to live and let live. And I'm sure their wives were, too, because I didn't see their names on the sign-up sheet."

"We are letting them live," he said. "It's not about stopping anyone. It's about maintaining family values."

Alice finally looked directly at him. "Family values," she said slowly, "are about staying home with your family on a Saturday evening."

Jared kissed her cheek. "I'll be back early," he said. "It's July; it'll still be light out when I come home."

Later, when he left to meet everyone up at the church, Alice politely (if a bit curtly) reminded him to pick up decorations for Madison's birthday party the

following week. “Make sure you get *Veggie Tales* stuff when you’re done,” she said. “It’s all she’s talked about for the past month.” He could hear Maddy’s dinner table chatter instantly in his head: *Bethany from school had a Veggie Tales party so can’t I have one? It was so cool. Pleasepleasepleaseplease!*

Hours later, standing on the crowded sidewalk in mid-summer humidity, Jared decided that the plastic smell of an air-conditioned suburban strip mall would be preferable to the heat, even if he had to buy Bob the Tomato balloons and Larry the Cucumber piñatas. Even through the clouds in the sky, he could feel his pasty Irish skin slowly developing a burn that would evolve into a farmer’s tan around his polo shirt. Meanwhile, other than a few cheek kisses and quick hugs with one another, no one at the parade had participated in any outwardly immoral abominations. The Sodom and Gomorrah that Pastor David made the parades of yesteryear out to be were not so. Still, Jared had never attended such an event. He thought it best to tag along to make a good impression with his fellow worshippers. As welcoming as he found the congregation, he still felt like the “new guy” every time he was around them.

A couple of local churches in or around the city had joined Jared’s church. Whether this was in solidarity or as a bizarre form of turf war, Jared was unsure. The scripture-reader (or yeller, rather) among their group had opened up to the book of Leviticus, and just as he got started, someone on a passing float aimed a bullhorn at their cluster of signs.

“Hey, bigots! If you don’t *like* same-sex marriages, then don’t *have* one!”

The revelers surrounding them whooped and clapped. Even a young man and woman, their arms happily around one another's hips, cheered along with the rest of the crowd. These people should be protecting the sanctity of holy matrimony, and they were *laughing* at Jared's group. Other churches went by in vans, on floats, or just on foot, and even though some were from denominations Jared didn't know existed, he wondered how so many people reading the same book could be so radically different.

A flying neon bit of candy, tossed merrily by a member of the city government, pelted Jared in the forehead. A boy of maybe about eighteen or nineteen, just a few years Jared's junior, caught a piece of bubblegum next to him. Unwrapping it and popping it into his mouth, he smiled at Jared as he began chewing.

"Would you like one of our tracts?" Jared said. "They're free." No one at the church had really explained to him *how* to spread the Word of God, but just told him to spread it any way he could.

"No, thank you," the young man said. He waved his hand away from the paper pamphlet, and Jared noticed a rubber rainbow bracelet stenciled with the word "Pride" just below the boy's wristwatch.

"Are you sure?" Jared asked. "God still loves you, and he wants you to--"

"I believe God made me just the way I am, thanks." Through the boy's loose T-shirt, Jared could see him straighten his posture--an understated defense mechanism. Like Jared, he suffered from hopelessly skinny shoulders as well.

“But what about your soul?” Jared tried handing the boy the pamphlet again, and for a second time, he made a passive swatting motion at it. “Aren’t you worried about where you go when this”—he gestured around him—“is all over?”

The boy shook his head. “I’m concerned with doing good in this life,” he said, “rather than doing good to go somewhere else when it ends.” He popped a bright pink bubble onto his lips, smiled, and disappeared into the crowd.

Another float passed by with tanned, toned men in short-shorts waving their hips to the pulse of an electronic beat. The other men in Jared’s congregation shouted the slogans on their signs. The other churches on their sidewalk joined them, but Jared saw a few of them try to raise their signs a bit higher and shout a bit louder. Jared looked around at all the warring churches. Some of the men had their guts hanging over the waistbands of their jeans and khakis, and others were as pathetically slim as Jared found his own body. Someone on their sidewalk threw a partially full water bottle at the float, and Jared winced. He hoped at once that no one would get hit with it and that it wasn’t someone in his church that had thrown it. It missed one of the dancers by about a foot. Jared held his breath for a second and expected the dancer to throw it back or yell at the churches’ gathering. Instead, he kept on dancing to the music as if nothing had happened.

Jared looked down at the dismal concrete sidewalk. The rhythm of the bass from the float carried down the street, giving the ground beneath him a shaking sensation. He wasn’t so sure he would be so calm if people were throwing things at

him. He worried that the mood of the entire event had taken a turn for the worst. Then, at the sound of applause, he looked up.

Older adults stepped beside younger ones. They carried signs and seemed to walk and embrace one another at the same time. One teenage girl, blond-haired, blue-eyed, and all-American looking by anyone's standards, walked happily between her beaming parents as they held a placard that said, "We love and support our daughter!"

When the last police escort waved everyone down the street and thanked them all for turning out, the multitudes scattered into diverging directions. Jared ambled behind two men who held each hand of a little girl between them. From the looks of it, they must have adopted her (since the men were white and the little girl looked Asian), but they smiled at her and one another when they promised ice cream if she finished her dinner.

"Brainwashed," Jared heard Pastor David say on the way to the public parking lot a few blocks down. "Those children don't stand a chance in the kingdom of God."

"Maybe *you're* brainwashed," someone behind them muttered. A group of young adults, all of several different races, some holding hands with the opposite sex and some with the same, pushed their way past Jared's group. They walked the same line with the church. Jared began to wonder if there was some truth to what the boy in the crowd had said. His church, and especially their protest, talked so much about the end of life and said nothing about actually living it. He didn't realize he was dragging his big poster board sign behind him until it caught on the back of his sneakers.

When they reached their cars, parade-goers and protesters alike, the first drops of rain fell from the heavy gray clouds above them. Jared made a mental note to stop at the party supply store.

So Damned Civilized

By the time Mary was on her third cocktail, her expression plainly stated *I want to go home*. I could tell this because her lips were drawn in a single tight, straight line, even when tipping the martini glass back for another sip. I patted her hand and my wedding ring clacked against the oversized sapphire sphere on her right ring finger. Her left hand, with her own wedding band and the equally bulbous diamond I'd proposed with, lifted the fruity drink to her mouth once more. Next to me, Alexander Pfeiffer, the head of the 401(k) Accounting department, laughed at his own joke. I gave him a grin though I hadn't caught the beginning of it. Mary's expression remained more or less the same.

"All because of the fucking dog!" he said, with all of his face, even up to his mildly receding hairline, turning red. "A fucking Pomeranian! Isn't that right, Cassie?"

The waitress had only walked away with our dinner orders moments before, but out of the eight of us at the table, everyone was at or past Mary's number of drinks except me. Alex swore he'd called ahead with the reservation, just an informal "thing" for the four guys in our department (plus wives), but we had waited at the bar for almost an hour. I had just received my second beer from the waitress before we ordered our food. I barely touched the first pint for most of that time at the bar. Honestly, for what the place charged, I could have run to the mega-mart across the street and bought a whole six-pack.

Such was the price of ambiance, I supposed. The restaurant was set up to make you feel like you were in Italy, or maybe Greece. It billed itself out front as “Gourmet Mediterranean”; the entrance beyond that was a wide archway lined with fake bunches of grapes. All of the booths and tables formed a circle in the shape of the room, spaced evenly around the bar in the center. Wide, white columns, like scaled-down versions of those at the Parthenon, lined the bar in a feeble attempt to wall off its noises. I guessed that maybe the gold-framed paintings of waxy fruit on the zinfandel-colored walls were supposed to be Mediterranean as well.

Mary let out a sigh next to me, which blew a strand of her shoulder-length auburn hair out of her eyes. Our “table” was actually two smaller, rectangular tables shoved together, with me and the guys at one end and our wives at the other. None of the couples sat next to one another except for Mary and me. When we were finally seated, Mary nearly leapt over the other women to get to the chair next to mine. I considered this somewhat ironic; she’d spoken to me as many times that night as she had to Cassandra, Lisa, and Raquel. The latter three at that point discussed the new Coach store that had opened in the mall a couple months ago. One of them (Lisa, I think—she and Raquel sported the same spray tans and bleached manes, so it was hard to tell them apart) asked Mary if she had shopped there yet. I wasn’t entirely sure what the place was—clothing, perhaps?

“Who needs all those logos?” Mary said. “I don’t like having to *read* a handbag.” She swallowed the remnants of drink three. That was the most I’d heard out of her since she ordered at the bar, and I had no idea what it meant.

Turning away from the unfamiliar territory, I noticed that the redness in Alex's round face had faded. He was well over a decade older than the rest of us, but his wife, Cassie, looked like the youngest one at the table—barely thirty, if that. Alex wore a gray, striped suit, despite it being a Saturday and us being nowhere near the office.

Jonathan, who was married to Lisa, and Eric, Raquel's husband, listened to Alex as he raised his glass and offered what was approximately the fourth toast of the evening. "To the best damn department at Human Resources International!" Eric was blond and skinny, like his wife, and wore silver wire-framed glasses. Jonathan looked equal parts college jock and timid accountant, like he still worked out even though the only sport he played involved riding a motorized cart around on a grassy field.

"Cheers!" we all replied. I took a gulp of my drink in a show of enthusiasm. Mary just wiggled her empty glass a little in a feeble attempt of festivity. The department's success was the real reason for this outing. We had just received our bonuses from corporate for attracting the most new clients out of all of our branch offices. I already told Mary I was placing the money into our savings, which she said was fine.

Eric, several times tonight, had talked of the possibility of buying a new car. "I've always wanted a Benz, but the little woman won't stop going on about getting an Escalade," he said as the subject came up once more. "Honey!" he shouted across the table, as they were at opposite ends. "What does a tiny thing like you need a big old car like that for?"

Raquel didn't hear him. She and Cassie were again absorbed in conversation about something, probably shopping related. Jonathan, who sat next to me, seemed distracted and stared off into space. I followed his line of sight. Cassie had leaned forward against the table, causing the low-cut neckline of her sweater to dip even lower.

Jonathan pushed himself away from the table and muttered, "Going for a cigarette," to no one in particular. I noticed Alex's narrowed eyes follow Jonathan out of the room, but he didn't get up to follow him.

I waited a moment and then kissed Mary on the cheek. "I'm going to the restroom. Be right back."

Mary's eyes said *don't leave me here*, but in a moment of perfect timing, our waitress set another drink down in front of her. "Okay," she said, her eyes glazing over a bit as if she could tune out the world around her.

Since the bathrooms were located in a short corridor near the front, I sneaked out through the heavy double doors of the restaurant's entrance. Jonathan's cigarette nearly fell out of his mouth when I walked out into the cool March air.

"Shit," he said. "It's just you. What are you doing out here, Nick?" He said it quietly, with one eyebrow raised and the cigarette dangling between his lips.

I wondered who else he thought I could be. “Enjoying the night?” I asked, thinking it best to be neutral.

“No,” he said. “Wish we’d stayed in. Lisa insisted we go. She hadn’t ‘caught up with the girls’ in a while.”

“Funny,” I said. “Mary didn’t want to go, until I promised her endless drinks.”

“It’s not Lisa that’s bothering me, anyway,” Jonathan said. He continued smoking his cigarette, not making an effort to elaborate.

I did think Jonathan seemed a bit like the brooding type when I started at HRI a year earlier. Mistakenly, I thought he was somewhat stuck up. After making the mistake of calling him *Jon* or *Johnny* one time, he informed me that he preferred to be called by his full name. I’d found out from Eric that Jonathan had attended some prep school in Connecticut some years before, so I thought this name preference seemed sort of blue blood of him. Turned out his father always called him by one of the nicknames, and since he had passed not too long before I started there, the wounds were still open. Couldn’t fault a guy for that.

In our department, Jonathan, Eric, Alex, and I were the “big four.” Alex had worked his way up HRI’s ladder and taken over 401(k) six years prior to my arrival. Eric had been there for a while, too, and when Jonathan, a former classmate from Yale, had applied, Alex just had to bring him into the fold.

I didn’t know any of them before I’d applied for my job as one of the four supervisors. I didn’t even have my MBA yet when Alex moved into his corner office. But my office had windows, just like all of theirs. I guessed that’s why I was there

that night. Some of the hardest workers we had weren't there—maybe because they sat in cubicles or maybe, I feared, because most of them were women. I hadn't been the one in charge of the guest list.

"So what then?" I asked. Jonathan offered me a cigarette and I shook my head. Mary would get pissed if she found me smoking. She had to quit back after our undergrad years when she began teaching middle school. I quit with her in what I felt was some kind of nicotine-patch solidarity. "Does it have to do with why you've been missing work?"

"Not *missing* it," Jonathan said. "I have 'accrued vacation time.'" He gave those last three words air quotes with his fingers.

"Yeah, what have you been doing with it?" For the past month, when I walked past Jonathan's glass-enclosed office, I found it empty more often than it was occupied. I hadn't missed any work except for a few days in December when I had the flu. My bonus check wound up being the smallest out of the four of us. I knew this because Eric couldn't keep his mouth shut. *It's related to how long you've been working here*, Alex explained to me. I tried not to think about the possible number of zeroes in Jonathan's check.

"You know," he said with a shrug. "Golfing, spending time with Lisa—normal stuff."

"Doesn't Lisa work?"

"Bankers' hours," he said. I knew from work conversation that Lisa was a bank teller. "Sometimes I go to the driving range. Alone."

“In March? In upstate New York?” A snow bank approximately the size of an avalanche’s aftermath sat across the parking lot from us.

The door to the restaurant opened and we both spun around. A teenage boy brushed past us. He carried a full garbage bag and headed toward the darkened alley next to the restaurant where the dumpsters must have been. He was probably still in high school, only wearing a t-shirt and jeans despite the frigid air.

I could see why he chose the well-lit front of the restaurant rather than any side or back entrances that inevitably led into the dark. The week earlier, Mary and I watched a news report about a man who strangled a woman at night near a gas station parking lot just a couple blocks from the restaurant. Most likely unrelated to that, there had been a slew of robberies and homicides extending from the city into all of its surrounding suburbs, including our own. All four of us lived out that way with our wives. In the land of suburban strip malls, million dollar homes, and gourmet restaurants, I found this sort of violence hard to believe.

“I bet it’s just some trash from the city trying to ruin the east side,” I’d said to Mary as we watched the report. I still don’t know if I would have said something like that a year before. Mary and I cuddled on the couch in our two-story home situated in a cul-de-sac, and I hoped we were safe from anything that might be outside. I glanced at the door in the front hall to make sure I’d locked the deadbolt.

The news said the victim and the defendant were both residents of our town. I tugged Mary a bit closer to me. “Right, from the city,” she’d said. “Because we’re so damned civilized here.”

The boy returned from the alley and went back inside. The wind picked up and I was suddenly aware again that a polo shirt and khakis weren't warm enough for prolonged periods outside in this weather. Just as I was heading back in, Jonathan finally spoke.

"If you have to know," he said, his voice carried like staccato notes on the breeze, "I fucked her."

Mary? I thought before I remembered that she hadn't been the topic of conversation. *Who then, Lisa? His wife?* "Who are you talking about?"

"Cassie," he said. "I've been meeting her at the Marriott on my days off."

When I put together the looks from inside at the table, it made sense. Cassie didn't work; Alex made more than enough to support them both. Of course, she'd be around. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because I've been paranoid all night," Jonathan said. With good reason, I thought. He crushed his spent cigarette underfoot. "I'm convinced Pfeiffer's got me here because he's testing me, trying to see if I'll crack."

I thought it best not to mention the look Alex gave him when he went outside for a smoke. "I'm sure it's nothing. You probably are being paranoid."

"I know he'll say something," Jonathan said. "I don't know when, but I bet he will. She's ignored me all night. As soon as she talks to me, he'll get us."

I didn't want to hear any more. "Come on, let's go back in."

"Don't tell him," he suddenly warned me, as if it hadn't occurred to him before that that I could tattle.

Trust me, I wanted to say, I want no part in this. “I won’t,” I said aloud. “Let’s go in.” A gust of artificially warmed air hit us when we entered the foyer, and we walked back through the faux grapevine.

The food had arrived when Jonathan and I were outside. I didn’t hesitate taking a bite of the warm steak I’d ordered, letting its temperature reheat my insides. Mary sniffed the air around me. “Have you been smoking?” she asked.

I pointed toward Jonathan. “No, I popped out for some air.” Mary nodded. I was relieved to see her just drinking a glass of water then.

“Too bad,” she said as she chewed a piece of her grilled chicken. “You missed the epic plasma versus LCD debate.”

The *girls*, as Jonathan called them, continued catching up by trading their current favorite TV shows. Jonathan and Alex both told Eric that Mercedes made “a damned good car.” Mary and I sat side-by-side and savored our dinner in peaceful silence.

The thing Jonathan dreaded didn’t happen until we were about to leave. We stood outside the restaurant on the sidewalk, saying our goodbyes. The restaurant’s outdoor lights illuminated everyone’s face in a hellish red-orange.

I didn't see what set it off. Maybe a sideways glance or a lingering handshake caused suspicion to tip over the edge into the territory of hostility. I had just heard Alex say, "Let's go, Cassie."

When I turned to look back, since I followed Mary in her beeline for the car, I saw Alex grab Jonathan's arm roughly.

"I know what you've been up to," Alex said loudly. "Both of you." Cassie took a couple steps away from him. Alex looked at Jonathan again. "I know what you're doing on your time off, you son of a bitch!"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Jonathan said. He tried to shrug his arm away.

"You don't have to lie," Cassie said. I saw her look Jonathan directly in the eye. Then she looked at the pavement and scratched it with one high-heel-clad foot. "I told him this morning."

"How could you?" Jonathan yelled. "Alex, it's not what you—"

Alex apparently did not want to hear the rest. His fist collided with a loud slap against Jonathan's abdomen. One of the buttons flew off the front of Jonathan's shirt and his cell phone flew out from his shirt pocket. The phone, expensive by the looks of the wide touch screen, crash-landed on the ground in the way only something delicate and plastic can when it hits a hard surface.

Jonathan stood back up and with a tight, closed fist, landed a punch right onto Alex's jaw. Alex reciprocated with a hit straight to the nose. I could hear the cartilage

snap from a couple yards away. A trail of blood covered both Alex's fist and Jonathan's shirt.

Mary came back from her position by the car and stood next to me. "Why couldn't this have happened earlier?" she asked. Either from the alcohol or from the emotion that sparkled in her eye (surprise? amusement?), she just watched—no more comments about wanting to leave.

"What do they mean?" Lisa suddenly asked. I turned to look at the person she addressed, even though I already knew the answer to that. "What have you been doing with my husband?"

"Lis, I can explain—"

Lisa's slender hand flew out like a dive-bombing bird and met Cassie's cheek with a crack that echoed through the parking lot. With one swift movement, they both threw their designer logo embossed purses to the ground and circled each other like hawks around prey.

"Aren't you going to stop them?" Raquel shrieked. Eric ran over to try to get Jonathan out of Alex's headlock. Raquel glared at Mary and me, and I just shrugged.

"I think this is something they should work out amongst themselves," I said.

Raquel pushed herself between Lisa and Cassie in an attempt to detangle Lisa's fingers from Cassie's long hair.

Mary shivered next to me. I took off my wool pea coat and threw it around her shoulders, and then I kissed her temple right by her hairline. "Let's go home," I said. She gave my hand a quick squeeze.

I sighed in relief when we reached the warmth of our sedan. As I drove toward the parking lot's exit, I saw that the brawl hadn't escaped the notice of the restaurant staff. I saw the hostess standing on the front steps, arms flailing and tight hair bun coming undone. She appeared to yell into a black cordless phone, probably to the police. The customers sitting at the tables by the front windows peered around the heavy red drapes to get a better look at what was happening outside. I turned out of the parking lot without glancing back again.

"That was interesting," Mary said from the passenger seat. "Let's never do it again." She rested her head against the window's cool glass, and her breath fogged up a small space by her mouth.

"Can't wait for Monday," I said. She let out a soft giggle. I wondered briefly if it was wrong to think about a promotion at that point.

I took my eyes from the road to look at her as we neared a stop light. Her eyes closed and the moonlight shone on her face like a lunar halo. She drew herself further into my coat and inhaled the scent on its collar. No, I couldn't do to her what *they* had done to one another.

"I love you," I said. She batted her lashes and spread her painted lips in a thoughtful grin. The traffic light turned green.

Affliction

Behind a display of stacked two-by-fours, Bobby clutched his bleeding arm and sucked the air through his teeth. “That thing came out of nowhere!” he said to me, and I tried vainly to look at the gaping wound he held through his white-knuckled fingers. The red, sticky mess of someone else’s blood and cerebral fluid stuck to the front of my green Fix-It Emporium apron, turning it a murky mud color. Thinking quickly, I had swung the shovel I nabbed from the store’s Gardening department at Bobby’s attacker, but that *thing* had managed to bite him just before I splattered its brains all over the cash registers. I wondered how the rest of our coworkers were fairing.

The plague of “the Afflicted,” as the news radio hosts called them, began sometime the night before. Someone had turned the radio in the employee break room on earlier that morning and no one dared shut it off, though the stations flipped back and forth depending who was around. The NPR liberals and Fox News Republicans alike espoused their different theories about how the sickness spread. Depending on which source you consulted, either the situation resulted from an “accident” involving U.S. biochemical counterterrorism materials, or it was the work of the terrorists themselves. Yet no AM commentator could argue against the solution that worked in every unintentionally comical horror film—destroy the brain or remove the head entirely. No one needed to tell us twice. As Nadine from the Paint department ran by

Bobby and me with a gore-soaked electric hedge trimmer, I could see that at least some of us were following these instructions to a T. Too bad this wasn't a movie.

Bobby gasped again as blood bubbled up from the jagged hole in his forearm. I could see his eyelids flutter and droop heavily, as if he were struggling to keep himself awake. Having to see Bobby suffer was a shame; I'd been working with the guy for almost a year and he'd stuck by me since I was in training. In a town where all of my high school friends had gone off to colleges far away, Bobby and the store had become my social life. That was the only thing that had kept me in retail for so long. I didn't really want to do this with my life, but it paid a few bills and helped me save up for an apartment.

I could see Bobby's face turning grayer by the minute. He looked at me through hooded, red-rimmed eyes. "Erica," he said. Really, my name sounded more like a strangled cry coming from him. He was losing blood and oxygen. "Erica, I need you to put me out of my misery. I don't want to come back as one of those... things."

"I don't know if I can do that," I said, but I clutched the iron shovel in my hands a little bit tighter.

A shadow loomed over the both of us, but to my relief it was just Mark, our shift supervisor. Mark was a nice guy, but always seemed a bit intimidating, having spent much of his adult life in the Army and Army Reserve. He had come to this job about two years earlier after returning home from Baghdad, with a bad knee and, according to those who knew him better, a sour outlook on life in general. He looked

down at me and Bobby, since we were both slumped on the floor, and I realized we probably looked equally grotesque. Bobby's arm stunk like mold. His head lolled to the side as if he were seasick, and his current complexion wasn't helping him any. My long blond hair hung lank in front of my eyes, matted to parts of my face and the sides of my head by grease, sweat, and any other substances I'd picked up throughout the day. My apron was starting to smell like Bobby's arm.

"Mark," Bobby said weakly. "Please... kill... me."

Mark lifted the heavy-looking axe on his shoulder as if he was a steroid-addicted batter and Bobby's head was the baseball. "I'm sorry to have to do this, Bobby," Mark said. He sighed and ran a hand over his brush cut. Bobby closed his wide, dark brown eyes, as if preparing himself for what was to come, and Mark made a motion with his hand for me to get up and get out of the way. I complied all too quickly, giving Bobby's shoulder a quick squeeze.

I didn't want to watch, but I kept turning to look behind me as I marched off away from them. When I got past the shelf lined with concrete mix, a couple aisles away from them, I peered over the edge of the bags cautiously. From there, I could see Bobby's eyes snap back open, the whites around his shrunken pupils gleaming. He bared his teeth and I heard him let out a low growl at Mark, and as he lunged forward, arms outstretched, I shut my eyes tightly, knowing what would happen next.

Behind my personal barricade, I crouched down, and I flinched only when I heard the unmistakable crunch of steel penetrating bone and brain matter.

* * *

Driving to work that morning, I hadn't seen anything out of the ordinary. I was more concerned with punching in on time by 8:00 a.m. Only when I punched in early at 7:55 did I realize how empty the roads had been for a weekday rush hour (not to mention the fact that I couldn't remember yelling at other drivers for moving too slowly or cutting me off in their own race to work... It was a morning ritual). Unfortunately, I sped through my morning routine so fast that I had forgotten my lunch (in the fridge) and my cell phone (still cradled in its charger).

I hadn't wanted to come in that day. I had sent out a few résumés lately, mainly for office jobs, but so far, no takers. I knew I couldn't just up and quit my job. Yes, I had some savings to help me pay rent in the meantime. Moving back in with my parents was *not* an option; with me out of the house, and my older brother, Andrew, living in Cleveland with his wife, Mom and Dad had grown used to the whole Empty Nester thing. I just knew upon waking that morning that something in my life had to change.

I was in such a daze that when I saw Bobby he just looked at me with his typical shit-eating grin and pointed to the window overlooking the parking lot. "Did you see them?"

"See who?"

Bobby grabbed my arm, led me to the windows nearest the checkout counters, and pointed to the Wal-Mart across the street. In that parking lot, dozens of people ambled amongst the parked cars and discarded shopping carts.

“What are they doing?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Bobby said. “They’ve multiplied since I got in at seven. It’s like they’re all hungover or something.” Bobby and I were no strangers to partying (and thus, hangovers); he attended the local polytechnic for Computer Science and I had just graduated from community college with an Associate’s in Communications. Bobby liked to joke that he minored in beer funneling. So far, that was the main thing we had in common—neither of us was doing what we wanted to with our lives... whatever that was.

“They can’t *all* be hungover,” I said. “It’s Wednesday! It’s not even Halloween yet!”

Bobby laughed and swung an arm around my shoulder. “Says the girl who works in the store where Christmas decorations go on display in September!”

From behind us, something heavy slammed down near one of the registers, and then came the shrill cry of, “Okay, what the *hell*?”

I turned around. Patty, one of the head cashiers, had thrown a till tray down on the counter and was picking up the pennies that had flown out of it.

“What’s the matter?” Bobby asked.

“Have you been outside?” Patty asked, just as loudly. Her hair currently sported bits of gray at the roots and temples, but I suspected for months that soon it

would be that color everywhere. She furrowed her brow and sighed. "Did someone put liquor into the municipal water supply? Is there a holiday I don't know about? It's like Moron Day out there! One of those idiots you two are gawping at jumped on the hood of my car when I pulled into the parking lot!"

"Whoa!" Bobby gasped. "Did you hurt him?"

"I wouldn't know," Patty said. She put her till into a register and flipped on her line's light post. "I wasn't going fast, anyway. I was turning to park the car and he just hopped up there, like it was nothing. So I hit the brakes, threw the car into park, and got out. I called after him, but then he started walking away like it never happened!"

Then I really began to suspect something was going on, something wrong that I hadn't heard about. Maybe it was a holiday. (Guy Fawkes Day? No, that was in November... and in England...)

"Did you catch up with him?" I asked.

"Yeah, and here's the kicker!" Patty dropped her voice to a whisper, as if someone other than us would hear her. I glanced around and didn't even see any customers in the store. "All the guy did was try to grab my face," she said, "like trying to eat it or something. I tried to reason with the guy but he was moving fine, so I just gave up. The guy looked rabid or something. I wasn't going to force the issue."

"Patty, why are you on register?" Bobby asked after an awkward pause. Patty normally supervised; she didn't really deal with the customers much. Lucky.

“Mark called me in,” she said, blowing a tuft of mousy brown hair out of her face. She threw it back into a ponytail in one swift, practiced motion. “He said none of the other cashiers showed up—or even called in!” Our store opened early, mainly for the convenience of the contractors and business owners who arrived first thing in the morning. It wasn’t uncommon to see the store fully manned by 7:00 a.m. during the summer peak hours.

At that moment, a customer approached me and sidetracked me from the conversation. It was nothing new at that point anyway. Patty was always going on about how her cashiering minions needed to get their collective act together. A half-hour later, after helping the customer take just as long to pick out a drill, I decided to head over to the break room for a cup of coffee.

I ducked through an aisle in Flooring, thankfully free of customers. I didn’t connect it at the time, but there really weren’t any customers to avoid anyway. I had seen maybe three or four in the store, and usually contractors packed the store that early in the day. Just as I was approaching the back corridor labeled “Employees Only,” something grabbed my arm tightly. I turned around and saw an older man behind me: construction company sweatshirt, messy hair peeking out from underneath a faded baseball cap, paint-splattered jeans. “Ma’am,” he croaked. I straightened my posture a bit and narrowed my eyes slightly, for one, because I’m only twenty-one and I hate when people call me “ma’am,” and also because his fingertips dug through my long-sleeved shirt and into the flesh of my bicep. “Please,”

the man groaned again. His heavily lidded eyes had hints of purple swirling in the skin around them. I tried to tug my arm away from him. "Don't... feel... good..."

I pointed with my free hand in the opposite direction. "Restrooms are that way, sir," I said. I pulled again and spoke more firmly. "Sir, please let go of my arm." He didn't budge. In this line of work, I've dealt with difficult people and heard all manner of innuendo from the creeps I encounter. ("So, how much *do* you know about tools?" Silent answer: *I know I'm talking to one now.*) But there was something odd about this guy. I had a feeling he wasn't your everyday perv who liked to harass the only girl in the Hardware department. His eyes suddenly rolled back into his head, the red-veined whites staring straight back at me. His body gave a sudden shake, and just as I thought he was going into a seizure, his eyes went back to normal except for the shrunken pupils. He clamped down harder on my arm and I gritted my teeth.

I saw Nadine at the end of the aisle and waved her over. "Let go of me!" I screamed. Nadine broke into a run. The man holding onto my arm suddenly lifted his free hand, as if in a motion to grab my face, and I recoiled in disgust. Blood dripped from a hole between his thumb and forefinger, gushing out in a black-maroon waterfall and onto my apron. It looked like a pitbull had used his palm as a chew toy. "What the...?" He snapped his teeth at me, his face moving closer to my shoulder. (What was he trying to do, I thought, *eat* me? Was this what Patty was talking about?) Nadine arrived just in time to tug on the guy's neck and pull him backwards.

Nadine was wiry, and about a decade older than me, but I could tell she was strong. As I rubbed the already bruising skin on my arm, where I could still feel the

placement of each finger, Bobby brushed past me to help Nadine. He punched the guy in the face, which seemed to knock him out, and pulled both us, without a word, into the break room. He shut and locked the door behind us.

“What the hell *was* that?” Nadine shouted. I noticed that the break room was full of employees, some with blood on their aprons, and the group included Patty and Mark. Someone shushed Nadine. A radio sat on one of the lunch tables and everyone huddled around it, listening with looks of deep concentration on their faces. I caught a snippet of the broadcast.

“—the government has issued a warning for people to stay where they are! Do not leave your homes or businesses at this time! No travel unless absolutely necessary. If you encounter one of the Afflicted, aim for the skull with a blunt object, or use something to sever the head. Board up your windows or use duct tape to—”

“How can anyone stay here?” Patty yelled. “I want to go home! I want to pick up my kids from school!”

“You heard the radio, Patricia,” Mark warned, arms folded across his broad chest. “I’m sure the school is keeping your kids safe, and you’ll be safer here, too.”

“Bullshit!”

Everyone turned to glance at the corner of the room. Jim K., the head of the Plumbing department, sat on the kitchen counter-like area next to the sink. He slapped his hand onto the granite surface. Most of the employees go by first name only, but there are currently six Jims working at our branch of Fix-It Emporium. I

peered around and noticed that Jim K. was the only Jim working that day. (Or, I shuddered with the morbid afterthought, the only one able to come to work.)

“Excuse me?” Mark asked.

“You heard me. I said ‘bullshit.’” Jim hopped down from the counter. It didn’t do a whole lot to make him taller, since he’s only about 5’5”. The other employees in the store call him Napoleon behind his back, but I never really got that because he’s always been friendly to me. “What are we supposed to do? Just wait here for these... *things* to storm the place?”

“They’re inside already!” Nadine exclaimed. She pointed at me. “One tried to get Erica!”

Jim turned his back to everyone. “Well, I’m not staying here to let them get *me!*” He strode past all of us and threw open the break room door. A fluorescent yellow sheet marked “Safety Checklist” flew off the back of the door and crunched beneath his feet. Jim slammed the door shut behind him only for Mark and Bobby to dash over, open it back up, and run out after him, leaving a sudden gust of air and a sense of dread hanging over the room.

The rest of us remained quiet and still for a few moments. Then we heard the screaming.

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Apparently, that guy Bobby punched out survived the hit (if “survived” is the right word). I only heard the rest secondhand: Jim got all the way to the front of the store where some of the “Afflicted” already wandered around. They took him by surprise and swarmed him, which was where the noise came from. Mark and Bobby found him, fought their way through the two dozen of those things up there, and Mark locked the automatic sliding doors at the front of the store. At that time, the rest of us arrived.

“Great!” Jim yelled. “Now we can’t get out!”

“True,” Bobby said. His attacker lunged at him again, trying to grab him around the neck. Bobby hit the offender with a piece of splintered lumber. “But now they can’t get in!” The blow knocked the thing to the floor, and Bobby stabbed it through the eye and into the brain with the end of the wood—a sort of makeshift stake. Then he pulled it back out of the thing’s skull with a sickening *pop*. The thing, with its eye socket overflowing with some thick liquid too dark to be just blood, no longer even resembled a corpse. I had never seen skin turn almost completely gray like that.

Nor could I believe that these were people! Could we hit them like that? I suddenly found myself wishing I hadn’t left my cell phone at home. I wanted to call my parents to see if they were okay. I wanted to call Andrew and find out if this had reached Cleveland.

Only when I saw their missing limbs, the bite marks on their bruise-colored skin, and the fact that they still walked among us did I begin to question their

humanity. Then one of them tugged on Nadine's hair from behind her, pulled her back and tried to bite down on her shoulder. Another Paint department employee, a new guy around Nadine's age, flung her attacker away from her in one motion and stabbed it in the neck with a screwdriver.

Some of my coworkers, I had to say, were ingenious. I saw one grab a large box of thick ceramic tiles and smash it down onto one thing's head. (I had one of those boxes fall on my foot before; I couldn't imagine how that would feel on the skull.) Nadine and Patty ripped two oversized (and thankfully plugged in) electric hedge trimmers from a shelf, since these were about the closest thing we had to charged chainsaws. From a colorful end-of-summer display, I snatched a heavy iron shovel. Mark broke the glass of the emergency station and took the thick red and silver axe, swinging it so fast he became a blur in a circle of four or five attackers. I noticed some of the ones around us were missing legs and arms, still limping or crawling toward everyone, oozing the same dark liquid from their wounds. It created a slimy trail across the concrete floor.

I faintly heard Mark shout for everyone to team up, so I followed Bobby behind the counter of a cash register. We swung the air in front of us and I accidentally knocked over the register's monitor in an effort to defend Bobby and myself. The chunks of plastic, wiring, and bits from the motherboard exploded upon the floor, dissolving into an electronic moat surrounding our enclosed island. The resulting sputter of a cough and spark from the machine scared a couple of the things away.

We did well fighting them off from our position until one of them figured out how to jump over the counter. From behind, it clamped its teeth down right on Bobby's forearm. It yanked out such a large chunk of flesh that in mere seconds, Bobby's blood pooled over the majority of the once bright green countertop.

I think I screamed when I knocked his attacker's head off with the sharp edge of the shovel. It took me a couple minutes to regain myself and find Bobby hiding in the Building and Lumber section. I tried to tell myself, without believing it, that I wouldn't be saying goodbye.

When Mark finished "taking care" of Bobby (I couldn't bring myself to think of him as one of those things, even if he was for just a second), he put his hand on my shoulder and led me to the back of the store where everyone else was safe and waiting. I glanced at Mark's face as we walked. He was only about forty, but the lines surrounding his eyes and mouth looked deeper and more worn than they had earlier that morning.

Mark locked us in the manager's office, a small room with only a couple of desks and chairs. All of us could barely fit in there. Computers and thick plastic binders almost completely obscured the desks. Although we were well into October, it felt as if someone still ran the air conditioner in the office. One of the enclosed

fluorescent lights in the ceiling flickered and buzzed above us, casting our half of the room in near darkness. I shivered and sat down in a battered swivel chair.

Mark pointed to a black-and-white monitor that picked up the security camera in the outside garden area of the store. "There's a hole in the gate," he said, noting a spot where some faint blur crawled at the bottom edge of the chain-link fence. The fence stood as high as the building. The thing stumbled for a moment and then headed through the shrubbery. "Someone has to go out there to close that off."

"Sure," Jim said. His foot tapped rapidly on the office's white tile floor. "Send one of us out there to die, sergeant."

"Look," Mark said. "I know you're not happy about this situation. I'm not either. But we're a team. We have to work together—"

"Why are you still in charge anyway?" Jim had raised his voice slightly. The light blinked over his balding head, casting his face in shadow. His light brown goatee looked pitch black in the darkness. "Just because you're the boss when we're working doesn't make you God now!"

Mark pressed his mouth into a tight line and spoke. "The radio said the National Guard is rounding up survivors—"

Jim rolled his eyes. "And if you really believe the government will save us, you're dumber than I thought!"

"It doesn't change the fact that someone has to go out there and close that gap up!" Mark shouted.

The room fell silent all for the buzzing in the ceiling.

"I'll go," I said. It didn't matter anymore, I reasoned with myself. I didn't even know if the rest of my family counted amongst the survivors at that point. Either we would become food for those cannibalistic bastards, or we would turn into them. If it had happened to Bobby, it could happen to any of us. We could only hide behind locked doors for so long. I woke up wanting my life to change that morning, but I hadn't sought this kind of excitement.

"I'll go with you, then," Jim said, much quieter this time.

Mark tossed Jim the keys to get into the Gardening department and looked at me. "There's a bunch of concrete blocks on an electric pallet jack. Just move that in front of the section and that'll hold them off... for now." Then he added, "Lock the doors back up when you're done, just to be safe." He said this to me, even though Jim was the one holding the keys.

Jim and I wordlessly exited the office. I could feel the other employees' eyes on us as we left. Someone patted my shoulder. I didn't look back to see who. As Jim unlocked the automatic doors that brought us to the garden, I realized we both held the same type of shovel in the same tight grip the whole way there.

"I'll stay behind you and keep watch," he said. "You sure you can move that thing?"

I nodded; I'd used one before. I hesitated for a moment, and then asked, "Why did you decide to come with me?"

Jim smiled, the first I'd seen him do so all day. "Hey, if *Fearless Leader* won't do it," he said, adopting a fake Soviet accent for the title, "then somebody has to."

We managed to make our way across the large expanse, ducking through rows of saplings and chrysanthemums. The pallet jack started up with a loud groan and a high-pitched beep, echoing through the silence of the garden. Just as I positioned it over the spot in the gate, I heard Jim from about fifteen feet away from me. "Shit," he muttered.

I turned swiftly. Three of the things circled him like vultures. I ran up and smashed one on the back of the head with the shovel to divert it. While he contended with the first two, I fought the other one. This one was male and I quickly noticed it was taller and wider than me by at least a foot in each direction. I swung at it with the shovel again, but it knocked the shovel out of my hand. The hit bent my wrist at an awkward angle so it flopped backward instead of staying straight. Shortly distracted, I cursed in pain, but I quickly jumped out of the way when the thing dove at me. I fell onto the ground, landing on my already sore wrist. Jim had taken out one of the two, but the other one had him backed into a shelf full of terracotta planters.

The thing drew nearer to me, its mouth salivating and its shadow enveloping my body. This is it, I told myself. I squeezed my eyes shut. I hoped it would be quick.

After I heard a swift metallic slicing noise, I opened my eyes and realized I was no longer beneath the large shadow. I glanced down next to me and saw the

thing's big gray head sitting next to me, severed at the neck and splattered with its own blood.

Mark held his hand out in front of me to help me up, his dripping axe shouldered like a battalion rifle. He must have taken out Jim's attacker as well. I gave Mark my good hand and he pulled me to my feet.

"I thought you were gonna leave us hanging," Jim said quietly from a few feet away.

Mark handed me my shovel. "Never said I would."

We walked back through the doors and Jim locked them back up when we were on the other side. As we passed the front of the store, I looked out the windows by the registers. At least a hundred more of them had collected outside. Some milled around the parking lot, their former lives and selves forgotten, even with the reminders of shopping carts and neon signs. Others peered in the windows and pounded on the glass panes, still aware there was something inside that they wanted. I felt a bit like them—lost—but in control of myself. I had the choice to do something with my life, I finally realized, rather than grapple blindly at the past.

Mark and Jim both gently tugged on my arms to pull me away. "Come on," Mark said softly. "Let's go to the back where they won't see us."

I heard the fluttering zoom of a helicopter pass over the building.

"Some of us went up to the roof," Mark told Jim and me.

"So someone will see us," Jim said. It wasn't a question. Mark nodded.

We arrived in the break room to a muted but relieved reception. One of the handheld radios we used to communicate in the store sat on the table. I heard a voice come from it; it was Patty: "Looks like there's another copter coming in. I'll see if I can wave it down." After that, everyone seemed to keep one eye on our makeshift weapons and one ear to the ceiling above us.

Love, Backwards

The marble headstone shimmered in the June sunlight. To Olivia, something was seriously wrong with that. Not simply the fact that it was there, and not that it was mere months old, but the fact that the sun's rays caught the pearly pink flecks just right and made them glitter bothered her. She could see the dark denim on her legs, ripped at the knees, and her battered black Allstars in the smooth rectangular surface, like a reflection in a mirror.

The end date on the stone was October 3, barely into Olivia's senior year of high school. Now the year was over. She had practically thrown her cap and gown off after commencement that morning and insisted to her friend Max that they come here.

Friend, Olivia reminded herself.

"I wish she could have seen me up there," Olivia had said in the car on the way to the cemetery.

"She would have been proud of you," Max had said. He had held her hand for a moment, and then dropped it abruptly. "I know it."

Deborah's name still looked foreign to Olivia on the stone. She felt like there was a misspelling every time she looked at it. It bothered her when she couldn't find one. Even now, in the sunlight, it still looked wrong. The interment had been on a cloudy day, so maybe that's why it looked... off.

Olivia pressed the toes of her sneakers into the lush grass and rocked back and forth on the balls of her feet. I should have brought flowers, she thought. She looked

down at her shoes. Next to a clump of dandelions, she saw a patch of clover, and she squinted through the brightness to find what she wanted. She spotted a four-leaf clover right in the center and plucked it, then set it down on top of the stone.

“I miss you, Deb,” she said. The words stuck in her throat halfway up and came out forced—not meant for others to hear. They sounded to her something like an out of tune guitar.

Max, still in the driver seat, started up his car as soon as Olivia walked away from the plot. It was early afternoon and the sun blazed from straight above them, but certain spots in the grass still squished under Olivia’s feet from leftover morning dew or the soft earth from freshly dug graves. Olivia got into the passenger seat and Max maneuvered the car back through the iron gates at the cemetery’s entrance.

“What was that you picked up?” he asked. They were further down the street, back to the area where small houses dotted the lane in neat rows. The graveyard gates were out of sight in the passenger side mirror.

“A four-leaf clover,” Olivia said. “I don’t know why, but I’ve always been good at finding them.” Her mind flashed to summers spent lying out in the lawn with a good book. It always bothered Deb that Olivia could do anything that resembled studying while working on her “tan” (which was her nice way of referring to the freckles polka-dotting Olivia’s skinny shoulders). In an effort to silence her sister, Olivia would hand her a four-leaf clover. She found there was always one around her somewhere. “Better luck bugging me next time, Deb,” she’d always say, and she’d flip to the next page in her book. Olivia would stick her tongue out for the full little

sibling effect. Deb would return it with a laugh as she placed the clover behind her ear so it stuck out sideways from her short brown hair.

“You should have kept it for yourself,” Max said. “You’ll need it when you start at Fredonia in two months.”

Olivia shrugged. “I can always find another one.” She hadn’t found one the last summer Deb was home, though. Olivia adjusted the small gray fan attached to the dashboard so she could get some air. Max had bought it earlier that year at K-Mart, where he worked between community college classes. His car, a shaky, bright blue Dodge Shadow that rode like a cardboard box on wheels, had no air-conditioning. What it did have, though, was a flimsy sunroof that opened with a quick pop and a fan powered by the cigarette lighter. Add in the loud stereo and a steady supply of mix tapes, and Olivia knew how she could get around in the summer. Max didn’t mind, or at least she assumed he didn’t. She recognized the tape on just then as one of Max’s favorites, filled with jangly guitars and lovelorn lyrics of angst.

“Why didn’t you get out?” Olivia asked. She flinched afterward. She had a bad habit of forgetting that, yes, Deb was her sister, but Max had been Deb’s boyfriend. Neither of them was there when *it* happened, though. She always wondered if Max thought about that as much as she did.

Max just shrugged and Olivia let out a shaky breath. “It was your time,” he said. “I can visit her again.”

They wound around the village's central traffic circle. While yielding to the entering cars, Max motioned with a lazy hand to one of the small, brick-fronted lanes. "Want to get some pizza? Or ice cream?"

Olivia shook her head. "I'd rather head back home. It's too hot out. You can come hang out if you want."

When they pulled into the driveway, Olivia looked in the car's side mirror. Her hair had gone back to its natural, flattened state, despite her having curled it just hours ago for the ceremony. Even through the humidity, Max's blond hair remained shaggy yet clean-looking. She always liked his hair—thought that and his facial scruff made him look like a rock star. Sometimes, she wanted to run her fingers through his hair. Max's t-shirt looked damp around the neck, though. Olivia pointed the fan toward him.

The inside of the house felt like an oasis compared to the heat outside. The car wasn't in the driveway, so her parents must have gone out. Olivia's father always said it had something to do with the large shade trees that surrounded the house. Olivia and Max trod through the kitchen and up the back staircase to the upper level. Their feet pounded on the boards, which creaked beneath their shiny maple finish. Olivia had an untied shoe from the short walk inside (always one of them, she mused) and it slapped against the upstairs hall carpet. Once she got to her bedroom, she kicked off her shoes. They each crashed up against her bed like tidal waves on a beach shore.

Her mother must have been in the room while Olivia was out. The commencement gown Olivia had tossed onto the floor was now smoothed out on her

bed. Next to it sat her mortarboard, with the Class of '95 tassel neatly fanned at its side. Olivia had only spent two years in middle school and had gone straight into high school. With still a couple months left before her seventeenth birthday, she was glad she could move on from high school this early. She debated borrowing her dad's cigarette lighter from the kitchen junk drawer to set fire to the mortarboard outside, but then she thought she'd have to concoct a cover story to explain its disappearance to her parents. Besides, she remembered, Dad kept his lighter in his shirt pocket. He had quit in September, so the lighter stayed in the junk drawer for a bit. By mid-October, it was back with him practically every waking hour.

Olivia and Max had hung out in her room a lot since October. She remembered the night her parents got the phone call from the campus police in Albany. Someone else, maybe Deb's roommate, had called Max. He showed up at their door a couple hours later, red-eyed and buried in a thin flannel shirt despite the rain. Olivia stepped aside to welcome him in, but he just collapsed onto her in a deadweight embrace. She remembered patting his shoulder, wet from the downpour but not entirely cold. His damp hair dripped onto her arm, and he smelled a little bit like marijuana. That wasn't the full reason his eyes were red; it was the reason he showed up that late in the evening.

They sat across from each other then, only about three feet away from one another. Max thumbed through the stack of LPs next to the stereo. Olivia had inherited them by default, though they sat in Deb's bedroom until sometime around New Year's. Deb's room still looked the same, with some of her dorm items stored in

a corner, collecting dust. Max pulled *EVOL* by Sonic Youth, who had been Deb's favorite band, and put it on the turntable. Olivia liked them, too. She liked the fact that they had both male and female vocalists. It seemed sort of democratic, she supposed, but she wondered if she could apply a term like that to a rock band.

When Olivia had been in ninth grade, around the time Max and Deb began dating, the three of them had gone to a used record store a couple of villages over. It was that day in late autumn that Deb had bought that particular Sonic Youth album. Everything seemed to shimmer with vintage chic, and Olivia had felt cool just being there. She still remembered the smells of dust and incense in the shop. The scents clung to her clothes after they left. She remembered Deb bypassing the tapes and CDs to head to the record section in the back. Deb said she hated tapes, because they always caught in the player, and CDs scratched too easily. Max liked records, too. He kept telling Deb which albums she should buy when she couldn't decide. Deb would laugh when he recommended something as a joke, like some forgotten disco relic. Olivia was just content to watch them talk and laugh. Max played guitar and sang in a band at the time, so Olivia guessed this made him some kind of authority on music. She'd liked his band—mainly because he was in it. Deb took her to see them a couple times, in friends' basements and at dive bars where teens could go before a certain hour to hear music. Once, when Deb had the flu, Olivia went by herself to hear them at a party. She wished Max was still in a band. She liked his singing voice. And he looked good under stage lights.

“So, have you picked a major *yet*?” Max asked, snapping her like a rubber band back into the present. He’d been bugging her about this since she started applying all over the SUNY system. She could have gone to a private school, but the tuition was too much for her parents to afford. The open window by the desk had tossed two of Olivia’s many acceptance letters onto the floor. One was for Fredonia. The other, that she’d saved, was from Albany. She saw Max eye the headers on both of them.

“Probably English Education,” Olivia said. “Or psych.” English sounded good—who wouldn’t want a major that let them read all day? Psychology sounded better on paper, though. At least she could read outside until it got cold. Plus, from what she’d seen of the area, Fredonia looked a lot like her town, just with more bars, so it would be like home except away.

Max grabbed the letter with the Albany seal at the top. “You didn’t tell me you applied *there*.” He said it as if he were speaking to the letter and not her. He drew the last word out for emphasis.

“It doesn’t matter,” she said. “I’m not going.” She swept her hair up into a ponytail. The back of her neck felt sticky; the collar of her t-shirt was wet like Max’s.

“Oh,” Max said and lowered the letter. “I mean you could, if you wanted to.”

“I don’t. It wouldn’t change anything.”

Mostly, Olivia didn’t want to pass that intersection, where Deb’s friend’s car spun around 180 degrees on the slick, rain-drenched pavement. Where the eighteen-wheeler in the other lane couldn’t stop fast enough and crunched the car like an

accordion against a patch of trees near the road. Where paramedics and the Jaws of Life pulled both girls from the wreckage, and a coroner pronounced them dead at the scene. That was how Olivia pictured it. That was how the police from Albany said it happened. The site wasn't too far from campus, and should she ever come across it, she didn't know if she could ever leave that spot.

"Fredonia's closer," Olivia said. She took the letter from Max's hand and ripped it in half. "I can come visit you on breaks."

"You promise?"

"Of course." She made the move and rubbed her hand on the top of his hair. "And you can visit me too, you know. You can take 5-and-20 all the way there."

"Oh, I will, then." Max gave her his typical Max Grin, the one that showed his teeth on the one side of his mouth with the chipped molar. "I'll show up while you're in class and kidnap you."

Olivia laughed. "My professors will love that." *I would love that*, she thought.

The first song on the album ended. The second one started up so quietly at first that Olivia had forgotten that it was still playing. She stared off into space and realized after a moment that she was watching Max's skinny fingers tap the slow beat of the song. She looked up and Max was staring at her. Their eyes met but he didn't look away. His mouth fell open.

"What?"

"Sorry," he said and looked down. His fingers still drummed on the baby blue carpet. "You have her eyes."

"I know," she said. "You've told me before." She knew he meant because hers were green like Deb's, though Deb's were slightly wider. Mostly, she wished she had Deb's wavy hair instead of her own, which always succumbed to some kind of coif-gravity.

"It's not that I just look at you and think of her," he said. He seemed to rearrange his body so that his limbs didn't stick out as much. "Sometimes thinking of her makes me think of you."

Olivia wasn't sure how to respond to that. She just nodded.

"I mean, I'm almost twenty," he said. His voice rose in an abrupt crescendo. "And you're only... I'm not some pervert."

"You're not," she said. "I'm going to college. Everyone there will be older than me." She didn't know why they were suddenly talking like this. It didn't scare her, but her stomach felt like it was floating. She didn't think her age was so troublesome, anyway. A fleeting thought reminded her of Deb again. It wasn't as if Olivia had talked to Max this way when Deb was alive. Back then, she never would have thought...

"Promise me you'll come back to see me," Max said.

Olivia thought of everything that implied, and then forgot it again. "I promise."

The record was still playing beside them. The singer begged a stranger to kiss her in the shadow of a doubt. The tempo sped up. Olivia held her breath as Max leaned forward.